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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BAMAKO 000063

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SUBJECT: (S) OBSERVATIONS ON UNFOLDING HOSTAGE CRISIS IN
NORTHERN MALI

REF: BAMAKO 00052

Classified By: Ambassador Gillian Milovanovic for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(S) Summary: On January 28 and 29 the Embassy spoke to two Bamako-based Tuaregs who have had direct contact with those believed to be implicated in the January 22 abduction of four European tourists along the Mali-Niger border. These discussions provided a clearer view of the status of the tourists and the handful of individuals previously identified as having played a role in the kidnappings. Since the kidnappings, we have also been invited by the British, German and Swiss to provide several briefings to various counter-terrorism and hostage negotiation specialists dispatched to Mali from London, Berlin and Bern. Our level of concern regarding the European consortium's inability to agree on specific modes of action and refusal to engage the Malian government at any level other than President Amadou Toumani Toure, his Secretary General Django Sissoko, and Director of Security Mamy Coulibaly, escalates substantially after each of these briefings. Since those on the ground in Bamako appear unable to take even minor decisions without the approval of all three home capitals, we recommend that the Department instruct Embassies London, Berlin, and Bern to inform counterparts of our information and to present what we believe is a highly time-sensitive course of action. The crisis teams now in Bamako face a short window of opportunity to try to negotiate the release of the captives before they are turned over to a "buyer" - likely AQIM. We believe they must immediately engage local Tuareg leaders from the Gao and Menaka areas to solicit advice and request assistance; the Europeans must broaden their contacts beyond President Toure, Sissoko and Coulibaly to certain individuals at other levels of the Malian government who have both the ability to influence events on the ground in Gao and Menaka and also affect decisions ultimately made by President Toure. Embassy Bamako has been deeply involved in the still unfolding hostage crisis due in large part to an extensive network of northern Mali Tuareg contacts. Since the tourists were taken on January 22, we have shared with our European colleagues the bits of reporting we can provide, observations on how to navigate the Malian government, and advice on potential ways forward. Since, thankfully, no American Citizens are among the hostages, the decision on whether to use any of this information as a basis for action is ultimately a European decision. End Summary.

More Contact with Alleged Kidnappers

2.(S) On January 28, sometime after 12h00 GMT, Sikabar ag Ouefene and Nabi ag Meyda, both Taghat Melet Tuaregs based in Bamako, had several brief telephone conversations with "Mohamed" who is one of the two Chamanamas Tuaregs allegedly implicated in the January 22 abduction of four European tourist along the Mali-Niger border (Ref. A). Ag Ouefene and Ag Meyda reached Mohamed over Mali's local cell phone network. Ag Ouefene is a local businessman in Bamako who has had prior contact with the Embassy. We know very little about ag Meyda beyond that he appears to be one of the few individuals actually able to raise Mohamed by phone. Ag Ouefene said Mohamed had moved toward the northern town of Gao and was therefore able to use a local cell phone as opposed to the satellite phones employed by most of northern Mali's traffickers and bandits. Ag Ouefene said Mohamed relayed two questions: how much will the Europeans pay for the tourists and what measures will be taken to assure the security of the hostage takers once the tourists have been liberated? Mohamed said it would be too dangerous for him to cooperate with officials in Bamako as this would compromise his chances of escaping the hostage crisis unscathed. Mohamed told ag Meyda and ag Ouefene that he distrusted telephones and would rather talk face to face, presumably somewhere near Gao and Menaka in northern Mali.

4.(S) Ag Ouefene repeatedly described Mohamed as scared, saying he would talk for a few moments on the telephone and then hang up, forcing ag Meyda to call again. Ag Ouefene said he and ag Meyda attempted to reassure Mohamed and encourage him to work toward releasing the hostages for his own sake and that of fellow Tuaregs who fear that Mali or

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westerners will use this crisis to portray all Tuaregs as sympathizers of Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Mahgreb (AQIM). Ag Ouefene reportedly told Mohamed to try to find a solution that did not involve passing the tourists to AQIM and to focus not on an eventual pay-off but on his own future.

5.(S) During a subsequent meeting with Embassy on January 29, ag Ouefene and ag Meyda stressed the urgent need for Mali to dispatch a quiet delegation of two or three hand-picked Tuareg leaders to the Gao-Menaka area, not to open negotiations but rather to gather facts in order to know whether Mohamed and the other potential suspects are indeed holding the tourists. Like other Malian Government and Tuareg leaders in Bamako, ag Ouefene said this delegation was especially urgent because the longer one waits, the more likely the tourists will be passed to AQIM. Ag Ouefene described Mohamed and the other alleged captors as "amateurs" who responded to AQIM's recent offer to pay, according to ag Ouefene, 3 billion Algerian Dinars or slightly more than USD 100,000 for each westerner captured anywhere but on Malian or Algerian soil.

The Unusual Suspects

6.(S) Our meeting with Ag Ouefene, and a separate discussion with the influential National Assembly Deputy from Kidal, Alghabass ag Intallah, provided a somewhat clearer picture of those suspected of orchestrating the kidnapping. Both ag Ouefene and ag Intallah believe that Intewika ag Ahmayed (aka Ousmane) is a Taghat Melet Tuareg trafficker based in the Algerian town of Tamanrasset. Ousmane's name was the first given to the Embassy by another Taghat Melet Tuareg on January 24 after nomads reported seeing 4 westerners covered with hoods in the back of a truck north east of Anderamboukane. Ag Ouefene said he spoke to Ousmane by satellite telephone during the weekend of January 24-25. According to Ag Ouefene, Ousmane denied involvement and said another group of Chamanamas Tuaregs was responsible for taking the four hostages. Both Mohamed and the other individual identified to the Embassy, who we now believe to be Tibla ag Tinfane, are Chamanamas Tuaregs.

7.(S) Like Mohamed, Tibla also seems to have moved closer to the town of Gao. On January 28, a Tuareg dispatched by yet another Embassy contact reported that Tibla was 30 KM from Gao and therefore questioned whether Tibla was really connected to those believed to have abducted the four tourists. However, later in the day on January 28 a Malian government official close to President Toure and the influential Minister of Territorial Administration, General Kafougouna Kone, told the Embassy that Mali had already put Tibla under surveillance and that Tibla had broken away from the main group of alleged hostage takers north of Menaka during the weekend of January 24-25 and traveled toward Gao. Ag Ouefene said he also believed Tibla, like Mohamed, was now in the general vicinity of Gao, and speculated that the two had left the four tourists in the hands of other, as yet unnamed, Chamanamas Tuaregs north of Menaka and Anderamboukane.

A Need for Speed

8.(S) Ag Ouefene, ag Intallah, and several other Tuareg contacts in Bamako have repeatedly stressed the need for a rapid fact-finding mission of Tuareg leaders to assess whether those suspected of holding the Europeans do in fact have the tourists in their custody. Ag Ouefene said he was uneasy about positively identifying Mohamed, Tibla and perhaps Ousmane as the kidnappers without traveling to Menaka to know for sure. We share this uneasiness. Ag Intallah told the Embassy that as long as the tourists remain in Tuareg hands, he and other Tuareg leaders can exert "a lot" on influence on the hostage takers to release the tourists. Ag Intallah stressed that this influence only lasted as long as the tourists were in the hands of fellow Tuareg and would evaporate the moment the individuals were passed to AQIM. Ag Intallah observed that this was the first time he had heard of Tuaregs abducting westerners and expressed concern that Mali or western nations would wrongly interpret this incident

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as evidence of Tuareg affinity for AQIM. He said that the Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC) could easily send some of its members to locate the hostage takers - provided they secured a laissez passer from the Malian military that would ensure that no Malian forces fired upon them while traveling south from Kidal. We know of one ADC commander, Ada ag Massamad, who has been dispatched by other Taghat Melet Tuaregs from Kidal to gather information about the tourists, but we have no information regarding ag Massamad's findings.

Mali Ready to Approve Tuareg Delegation

9.(S) Kader Bah, who is a close confidant of both President Toure and Minister Kone, has also repeatedly contacted the Embassy, at times pleading with us to convince the Europeans to ask Mali to quietly commission a group of Tuareg community leaders to travel to Menaka. On January 25 Bah told the Embassy that Mali was ready to dispatch a Tuareg group but needed an official request from one of the governments concerned. We relayed this information to the German, Swiss and British later the same day, and reiterated this recommendation on January 26. On January 29 Bah contacted the Embassy again to say that it was imperative for the Europeans to reach out immediately to several key Tuareg leaders from Gao and Menaka and that they could do this by simply notifying the Malian Presidency of their intention and then inviting the individual leaders to a meeting with assembled European representatives. Bah provided a draft list of potential invitees. Obviously frustrated by the inaction within the Malian presidency - which was consumed for two days with a visit by President Abdoulaye Wade from

neighboring Senegal - Bah also provided one suggested talking point: tell the local leaders to get involved or Europe will withdraw all aid for northern Mali. While we do not agree with Bah's proposed ultimatum, we do believe that speaking directly to the leaders of the zones where the hostage crisis appears to be unfolding is imperative.

10.(S) Bah also expressed concern that the British position, which he described as "the hostages would die before the U.K. agreed to pay a ransom" had been leaked by a Tuareg official within the presidency to Tuaregs on the ground in Menaka and Gao. Bah indicated that this leak could short circuit any attempt to establish contact with the hostage takers before such an attempt even got underway.

Specific Recommendations

11.(S) One cannot overstate the need for quick action in order to prevent the four tourists from being passed to AQIM, assuming that this transfer has not occurred already. We seem to have had a least one stroke of luck - the identification of three potential suspects by local nomads north east of Anderamboukane - which may have potentially delayed this hand over and provided several new options that were not on the table following the abduction of the two Canadian diplomats in Niger in December. We fully agree with ag Intallah, ag Ouefene, Kader Bah, and several other Tuaregs who have argued that the hostage situation, however difficult, remains manageable as long as the tourists are in Tuareg hands. The Scotland Yard representatives now in Bamako appeared to be swayed by our analogy of a grappling hook: each local Tuareg leader who manages to make contact with one of the presumed hostage takers represents a hook that is preventing the kidnappers from moving toward AQIM's orbit. The more hooks we can sink into this group, the better the chances of preventing or delaying a hand over and the greater the likelihood for a successful resolution.

12.(S) On January 28 our primary contact on the German investigation team said that he, too, was now convinced that someone needed to dispatch a group of Tuareg leaders to Gao and Menaka to at the very least ascertain whether this lead is valid or simply a dead end. If it is valid, there is nothing to lose in sending a mission to Menaka. If it is a dead end, then we should know within the space of two or three days. The German representative, however, said he would now have to convince not only the other members of his

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team, but those pulling the strings from Berlin.

Expanded Lines of Communication to GOM

13.(S) The British, German and Swiss Embassies in Bamako appear to be working only through President Toure, his Secretary General Django Sissoko, and Security Chief Mamy Coulibaly. While it is extremely important to have open lines - and we are not sure any of the Europeans have direct lines open - to each of these individuals, restricting interaction to only the very highest level of the Malian government is a recipe for inaction, which in turn is a recipe for allowing the hostage takers to pass the four tourists to AQIM. It is an open secret within the Malian government that the best way to get President Toure to take action is by leading him to the decision that needs to be made. The Europeans, however, appear content to await a decision from the Presidency, or worse, the notoriously unreliable Mamy Coulibaly. We fear that without some careful prompting - that would begin via discreet discussions with certain well placed individuals at other levels ranging from Minister Kafougouna Kone to Kader Bah to certain elected Tuareg officials from northern Mali - no such decision is

forthcoming.

14.(S) Many blame the Austrian government for fueling what now seems to be a cottage industry of hostage taking in northern Mali. The Austrians, however, proved adept at cultivating Tuareg and Arab leaders in northern Mali. Recent discussion with the Canadians indicate that Canada is beginning to take a page from this play book as they start to actively reach out to a broad array of northern Malian elected officials and community leaders. We find it difficult to understand why it is taking so long for the British, Swiss and Germans to come to the same conclusion. This is that much more frustrating because, unlike the Canadians and the Austrians, there is credible information indicating that the four tourists are in a specific area which would enable our European colleagues to target a very specific and very small group of Tuareg leaders.

15.(S) Our specific recommendations are the following: (1) Urge the three European governments to instruct their representatives on the ground here in Bamako to (a) either immediately meet, with the permission of the Government of Mali, with key local Tuareg leaders to seek advice and request their personal involvement in order to dispatch a discrete group of Tuareg leaders to the Menaka area, or (b) ask Mali to officially commission a group of trusted Tuareg leaders to travel to Menaka to identify whether reports regarding Mohamed, Tibla ag Tinfane and other Chamanamas Tuaregs are correct; (2) Advise the British, German and Swiss governments to instruct their representatives in Bamako to open new, additional channels of communication within the Malian government in order to accelerate the decision making process within the Presidency.

16.(S) The decision to proceed clearly falls squarely on the European nations whose citizens disappeared south of Anderamboukane. Yet we would be remiss in not informing capitals of our deep concern for the cost of inaction and narrow lines of communication.

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